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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000864

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SUBJECT: LOCAL SYRIAN ELECTIONS: NO FOLLOW-THROUGH ON PROMISED ELECTORAL REFORM

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Municipal elections in Syria, scheduled for August 26, have failed to inspire the public and lack the large, public expenditures that characterized Parliamentary elections earlier this year. The lack of enthusiasm reflects a widespread lack of faith in the system and the well-founded belief among Syrians that local government wields very little power. Early hopes that the government might follow through on promises of electoral reform -- periodically floated since the 2005 Ba'th Party Congress -- have fizzled as the promised new electoral law has failed to materialize. Consequently, the municipal elections are all but certain to fit the Syrian model of heavily managed elections. Most opposition groups including the Damascus Declaration, have announced they will boycott the poll, although some Kurdish groups say they will run in the elections in the Northeast.
End Summary.

OVERVIEW

¶2. (U) On July 24, President Bashar al-Assad issued decree number 303 announcing that elections at the level of regional governorates and governate capitals, including Damascus, would be held on Sunday, August 26. The Minister of Local Administration and Environment, Hilal al-Attrash, followed with a decree announcing the same date for urban area municipal elections. Each governorate soon followed suit with their own decree announcing elections for village councils.

¶3. (U) Approximately two-thirds of the seats in councils at the governate, city, town and village level are up for election on August 26. The other one-third of seats are appointed by the government, as are mayors and governors.

PUBLIC REACTION

¶4. (SBU) Thus far, the campaign for municipal elections has been characterized by a lack of fanfare and public interest. Though official banners urging the public to vote began to appear in Damascus after the official start of campaigning on August 6, banners for individual candidates have only become more noticeable within the past week. While Emboffs have seen some election banners in Damascus and Deir az-Zour, the tents, performers and general festive atmosphere that accompanied the parliamentary election and presidential plebiscite have been largely absent. Moreover, Embassy reports from Daraa, Missyaf and Homs point to a distinct lack of interest among the local population.

¶ 15. (C) Civil society activists and opposition members argue that the lackluster response stems from the widespread and well-founded assumption among Syrians that local government, particularly in major cities, wields very little power. Though we have heard anecdotally that Syrians place more importance on local administration at the village level, Embassy officers have not seen markedly greater interest in the elections outside Damascus. Finally, diplomatic contacts observe that Syrians may be feeling election fatigue, with these elections coming on the heels of the much more high-profile parliamentary elections and presidential referendum earlier this year.

EARLY HINTS OF ELECTION REFORM PROVE UNFOUNDED

¶ 16. (SBU) The general lack of enthusiasm for the upcoming elections persisted despite early indications that the government might uphold promises to allow more open municipal elections. Since the June 2005 Ba'th Party Congress recommendation to revise the election laws for parliamentary and municipal elections, the SARG has periodically raised the issue of a new law for local elections. In early 2007, SARG officials made public statements of intending to follow the "Turkish model" for local elections, going so far as hosting a technical delegation made up of Turkish experts. On May 15, regional Arab daily al-Hayat quoted al-Atrash as saying "a political decision was made to prepare for a new local administration law that will practically lead to entirely free elections in 2007, away from closed lists,." (Note: Though Syrian voters ostensibly receive an empty ballot on which to enter the names of their chosen candidates, in practice, voters are accosted at polling stations by party representatives -- mostly from the government-sanctioned

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National-Progressive Front (NPF) -- with pre-ordained lists of candidates reflecting SARG preferences. Due to pressure or a lack of voter awareness, these lists become the de-facto ballot in most elections. End note.)

¶ 17. (C) The early buzz among political commentators and others on the election highlighted the possibility that the SARG might indeed refrain from publishing lists of its preferred NPF candidates. SARG support since 2005 of a UNDP program focused on local election reform also raised some hope for greater openness during this round of elections. Within the last few days, however, election banners nation-wide once again appeared with NPF lists of names prominently displayed. Al-Atrash also backed away from earlier promises of election reform. On August 6, he told al-Thawra that, "the (election) law has been almost finished but shall not be passed before being evaluated." He then added, "the (election) law can be applied after the elections."

¶ 18. (C) Another sign of the general ambivalence toward the election is the lack of new candidates. Civil society activist and academic Radwan Ziadeh pointed out that some of the independent candidates in Damascus were losers from the parliamentary elections. Many of the failed parliamentary candidates have not even purchased new posters, using instead the same ones they did in the parliamentary campaigns in March. Diplomatic contacts shared similar observations, noting that many parliamentary candidates may have run in the parliamentary elections expecting to lose but with the hopes of buying some name recognition for the local elections.

¶ 19. (C) Ziadeh also noted that several regime insiders are running as candidates. In Darayyah, a medium sized city just south of Damascus, the driver of Vice President Faroukh al-Shara'a's wife will run for one of the 16 available seats as are a number of sons of Ba'ath Party members and security service officers, according to Ziadeh.

OPPOSITION RESPONSE

¶ 10. (C) The Damascus Declaration (DD) announced August 11 it

would boycott elections. DD leader and former political prisoner Riad Seif dismissed the idea that local elections would be any freer than past elections. Seif said that the DD did not want to lend any credibility to a deeply flawed election process that needed complete overhaul. Fawaz Tello, another former political prisoner and DD member echoed Seif's comments and added that the DD did not want to waste valuable resources on an election that nobody cared about and that would produce local officials with no power. Tello also said that the imprisonment of Seif and fellow former MP Mahmoud Homsi provide an illustration of what the regime will do to well-intentioned politicians who, if elected, try to change the system.

¶11. (C) Not all opposition groups will boycott the local elections, however. Three Kurdish parties -- the Kurdish Yekiti Party, Kurdish Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish Future Movement -- announced they will combine forces to run in the elections in the Northeast of the country. The Kurdish Future Movement said in a statement on August 15 that their goal was to use the opportunity of local elections to present an alternative to the regime and take a stand against the "sham" elections. According to the Damascus representative of the Kurdish Future Movement, Hervin Ose, the goal of the three parties is to not only field their own candidates but to encourage independent Kurdish and Arab community leaders to stand for office.

¶12. (SBU) Comment. The SARG's failure to follow through on its proposed reforms fits a larger pattern of retrenchment on political freedom in the country. Moreover, the regime has shown a relative lack of enthusiasm in promoting these elections. There have been some public announcements encouraging people to vote but not nearly as many as there were for the Parliamentary elections and the Presidential referendum.

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